Black Soldiers in Tuscany during World War II

By Owen Brown

At Camp Darby, a U. S. Army installation near the city of Pisa, two African-American retirees with much in common meet often to reminisce about their military careers.

Army Retires Sgt. 1st Class Donald Spencer (over 90) and Sgt. 1st Class Fred Lee (Over 80) are both veterans of the Allies World War II campaign in Italy. They both fought with the famed Buffalo Soldiers, a group whose origins date back to America's Plains Indian wars.

Spencer, a dignified, soft-spoken man whose face is a striking contrast of warm brown skin beneath snow-white hair and mustache, retires from military service at Camp Darby in 1963. He has lives for over 50 years in the Tuscan region with his Italian wide, son and daughter and grandchildren.

As energetic and animated as Spencer is reserved, Fred Lee also married his Italian sweetheart and also remained in the army after World War II. Upon retiring from military service in June 1963 at Fort Riley, Kansas, he returned to Italy with his family and settled in Pisa. He and his wife raised their three daughters and two sons there.

When encouraged to talk about their war experiences, both Spencer and Lee recount several incidents that make it clear they were embroiled in two vastly different conflicts. There was the official war, a deadly epic battle against the Nazis and Fascists.

And there was the "unofficial war", a demoralizing, daily struggle to survive the anti-black climate in camps near the battlefront.

Both men spoke candidly about the bias they encountered in the camp – the racially offensive comments and treatment that seemed designed to undermine their confidence.

"The black soldier was not supposed to be a fighter," explained Lee, describing the prevailing attitude of army brass.

"We had some trash!" he insisted. "Just like the whites had some trash!"

In spite of having to contend with enemies on and off the battlefield, the two men also recalled incidents that reflect the bittersweet, even comical side of their war experiences. Interspersed with memories of racially discriminatory practices are antidotes that lend a human dimension to the war and its aftermath.

Spencer, for example, enjoys reminiscing about an annual ritual that once engaged two intractable foes – American officials at Camp Darby and an aggrieved Italian family.

"In the period following the Allied victory over the Axis powers, an Italian family would show up once a year at the Camp Darby headquarters to present a legal-looking document to the base authorities which denounced the Americans for trespassing on privately-owned property," said Spencer. "The family members insisted that they owned the land on which Camp Darby was located."

"They had purchased the property, they claimed, from an American military officer. A Black-American military officer," said Spencer, grinning.

From Laborer to Soldier-Translator

Buffalo Soldier Donald Spencer was born on June 29, 1910, in Thelma, North Carolina, but was reared in New York City's Harlem District. Caught up in the fervor of the forties, he enlisted in the Army.

It was the summer of 1942, and he was 32 years old. After several months of intensive combat training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, he was then assigned with the 99th Infantry Division.

In November 1942, Private Spenser's division departed for North Africa, arriving in the city of Casablanca on Nov. 18. There, the 99th would soon dace the combined German-Italian forces. Though he served as a laborer, not as a combat soldier, Spencer repeatedly jointed the fighting forces.

For his battlefield performance during the Tunisian Campaign, he was awarded a Bronze Arrowhead and a Bronze Star – one of five Bronze Stars he would eventually receive during the war.

Spencer sometimes falters when trying to recall the details of the battles in which he fought; campaigns waged in North Africa, Southern Italy and Tuscany. As a young father, though, he often talked to his son Paul, now a mechanical engineer, about his battlefield experiences n Africa and Italy.

"It wasn't difficult for me to talk to him about the war," he offers. "Sometimes I'd tell him, sometimes I wouldn't."

But there were also times when the former Buffalo Soldier, traumatized by war experiences, would simply tell his son, "You don't want to know."

Following the Tunisian campaigns in North Africa, Spencer's division left for Italy, arriving at Paestum in September 1943. his divisions missin in Italy was to participate in the Allied struggle to destroy the Gothic Line, the defenses that the entrentched German occupying force had constructed to bar the Allies from the Po Valley, a rich agricultural and industrial center in the north of Italy.

Once in Italy, the 99th joined other reinforcement units selected to augment the 92nd division, the famous military group known as the Buffalo Soldiers. At the time, the 92nd was engaged in pierce, protracted fighting along the coastal sector of the Ligurian Sea and, to the east in Massa and in such Serchio Valley mountain towns as Pietrosanta and Castelnuovo di Garfagnana.

Besides working as a laborer and fighting on the battlefield, Spencer also served as a sussistenza, a position that required him to translate English into Italian for Italian military officials and to translate Italian into English for American Army officials. Though untutored in Italian, he possessed a natural facility with the language, and is exceedingly proud, to this day, of the contributions he made as an interpreter.

Spencer values, as well, several less dramatic, but equally important contributions—dispensing food to children in the war-torn areas and making sure they receive prompt medical attention; and comforting the wounded German prisoners in his care while helping them onto Allied ships at the port of Livorno, in the Tuscan region.

With his deliberate speech and calm demeanor, Spenser often sounds as id he has managed to distance himself from the emotional turmoil that the wartime racial climate generated.

"Black soldiers," he recalls dryly "lived in tents while the white soldiers lived in buildings that were located along the lush shoreline in Tirrenia, a seaside resort near the base."

"After military authorities decided to move the Camp Darby's black soldiers into the building, the white soldiers retaliated," said Spencer. "They tour out all the plumbing when they heard the black soldiers were going to move in."

After the war, the humiliations continued.

"White servicemen were allowed to perform normal, peacetime military duties," contends Spencer, "while black soldiers were assigned to such menial tasks as gardening and maintenance work around the homes of officers."

And when the soft-spoken Buffalo Soldier applied in writing for permission to marry his Italian sweetheart, his commander ignored the request.

Says the amazed, elderly war veteran, "They were throwing the application papers into the trash can!"

But the incident that still mystifies him after more then 50 years is the promotion he earned , but never received, He was promoted to E-7 while serving in Italy, claims Spencer. Yet he has never received the recognition or monetary value for the promotion, which dates back to 1945.

In spite of the years wasted trying to resolve the matter, Donald Spenser faces life with equanimity. When describing the affront, he manages to sound more like a bemused observer then a frustrated veteran.

"I guess they're waiting for me to die." He suggests, without the slightest trace of rancor.

Still Awaiting Recognition

Like his friend and fellow veteran Donald Spencer, Fred Lee is equally proud of his wartime military record. He was one of the few black-American, non-commissioned officers to see combat during World War II.

Lee was born on Dec. 19, 1918 in Birmingham, Ala., but spent his childhood years in Akron, Ohio, where he attended integrated public schools. In March 1941, soon after being drafted into the army, he was sent to Fort Bragg, N.C. for basic training.

Following months of intensive training, Lee was assigned to the 184th Field Artillery Battalion, Fort Lee, Va. After training with the 96th Tank Division in Fort Custer, Mich., he joined the all-black 92nd Infantry Division in Fort Huachuca, Ariz., for deployment with a convoy to the Mediterranean.

In the summer of 1943, Lee arrived in Italy, landing, he recalls, soon after the Nazis and their Fascist allies had moved on up above the Tuscan towns of Viareggio and Lucca. During the Allied campaign in Tuscany and other regions, his division fought costly battles in several areas near the cities of Florence, Genoa, Milan, in the seaside towns of Forti di Marmi, La Spezia and Massa and in the villages of Pietrasanta and Lucca and others to the north and northeast.

As the Allied casualties mounted, the need for more troops increased. Lee's division, the 92nd, would undergo several dramatic changes. Its numbers would swell to nearly 25,000 troops, including personnel not only for infantry, but for medium and light artillery, tanks and tank destroyers. More significantly though, the division would be integrated racially. White reinforcements arrived from Britain and the U.S., along with second-generation Japanese-American troops or *Nisei.*

The Asian, black and white soldiers were expected to work together towards a common goal, yet the old racial prohibitions remained intact.

"The black soldier," Lee recalls, "was the last to get anything – whether it was clothes, sheets, pillows or pillowcases."

He recalls, as well, the more demoralizing practices: denying African-American soldiers a chance to engage in combat; restricting them to janitorial work and jobs in the mess hall; and housing them in segregated, less-desirable living quarters.

Losing the paperwork for promotions or major career advancement was another tactic used to demoralize the black soldier. For his wartime efforts, Lee was awarded the European Campaign Medal with two battle stars as well as the World War II Victory Medal and the World War II Occupational Medal. While earning these awards on the battlefield, he decided to apply for officers' candidacy school. Unfortunately, his application papers disappeared. To this day, Lee is convinced that his superiors either lost or trashed his application.

Lee adds that the military's discriminatory practices at the time also extended to affairs of the heart. To discourage African-American soldiers from fraternizing with the Italian women, army brass would routinely give an African-American soldier extra duty or cancel his leave pass, thus preventing him from going into town to see his girlfriend.

"These types of inequities enraged the black soldiers at Camp Darby," says Lee.

Troubled by the mounting racial tensions, the army called in the celebrated black army officer, Brig. Gen. Benjamin Davis, Sr., to help calm the troops. Davis had enlisted in the army during the Spanish-American War and had served during World War I with the 99th Regiment, an all-black cavalry unit. Years later, he was appointed as special advisor to General Dwight Eisenhower and was assigned to the politically sensitive mission of inspecting the army's black troops and aiding their progress.

During World War II, Davis traveled around to the various bases and camps, reviewing the training programs for black recruits, suggesting policies to improve their living conditions and trying to encourage their acceptance within the military. But he faced a formidable task.

In camps near the battlefront, life was far from being a model of fair play and tolerance. Commands with little faith in the combat skills of black soldiers routinely assigned them to segregated labor battalions, where they spent most of their time cleaning latrines and performing other menial duties.

Soon after arriving at Camp Darby to inspect the black troops, Gen. Davis delivered a blistering speech to the African-American service men of the 92nd Infantry Division.

According to Lee, the military's highest-ranking black officer told his soldiers, "You've got to DIE for your country and make a name for yourself!"

Then things got worse. Lee recalls Davis telling the stunned black trios, "You're my COLOR but you're not my KIND!"

The former buffalo soldier shook his head slowly, a sly grin on his face, "after he finished, nobody said a word."

Despite Davis's intervention—his noble, but misguided intentions—the camp's racial problems proved intractable.

"The 92nd Infantry Division's white soldiers," Lee recalled "continued to fight as a group, while the divisions Japanese-American soldiers fought alongside the Black-American soldiers."

“The two groups of minority soldiers fought well together,” Lee insisted, “with the *Nisei* proving to be exceptionally tough, disciplined and brave.”

Lee speaks with unbounded enthusiasm about the time his unit and Japanese-American soldiers helped clean out a division in the mountain enclaves around Massa.

“The Germans had a gun mounted on a long railroad flatbed and it was so big you could almost crawl on your knees up the barrel,” said Lee. “The projectiles that came out weighed 600 pounds.”

According to the World War II veteran, the flatbed would come out of the tunnel; the German soldiers would fire their huge gun and then the flatbed would disappear into the tunnel.

Because of the enemy machine gun fire, land mines and constant bombardment from the hidden artillery piece, Lee’s unit found it impossible to advance. Whenever the enemy launched an attack, the men had to scramble.

“You never could tell when ‘Jerry’ was going to come down and harass us,” Lee recalls.

Each time the Germans fired their big 180 mm guns, scores of Allied soldiers and civilians—most of them mothers with small children and elderly people who had no choice but to remain in the villages—lost their lives or were gravely injured.

Eventually, Lee’s infantry unit figured out how to launch a successful counterattack.

“We could pinpoint that doggone tunnel, drop 15 rounds into that darn thing and there ain’t nothing they could do,” asserted the feisty veteran. “In fact, several British units and other Allied soldiers not only praise our group’s success, but often asked ‘How do you do that?’.”

“The secret,” he explained proudly, “was using high-angle fire,”

Despite his wartime contributions, Lee often faced the same obstacle as his buddy Spencer: a lack of recognition from superiors for a job well done. Though his artillery battery successfully knocked out a destructive piece of artillery hidden in the mountain tunnel, a big gun that killed and maimed hundreds of civilians and soldiers, his unit never received a citation, he claims. Nor did the group receive a letter of recognition—the customary award for such a battlefield achievement.

Despite the frustrations and humiliations of his war experience, Lee is nevertheless, a jovial, articulate and life-affirming man who often faces the injustices of his military past with a wry joke shared with fellow Buffalo Soldier Donald Spencer and other close friends in the Camp Darby community.

Like Spencer, Fred Lee is at peace with his past and with his life in Italy, his adopted country.